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Journey Among TYRANTS

By A. M. Rosenthal

WHEN I WAS YOUNG AND writing from Korea, I met a boy from Manistee, Mich., as he was standing guard in the chilly spring along a forgotten front. He was a private and his name was Robert Zawicki; he was 20 years old.

I thought it quite strange and poignant that this young man had been posted to a duty whose purpose was to delay for a few minutes — perhaps his last — an enemy he really did not know, to protect a country he did not know, because of a war that started when he was 9 years old, playing in Manistee.

That was 25 years ago. I returned not long ago to South Korea for the first time since those reporting days. American youngsters are still in combat position on that line, which most of their countrymen remember only dimly, the 38th parallel. They are strengthened against peacetime torpor by night patrols, endless training and regimental élan. They still face the reality that the North Korean enemy just over there, within sight and sound, could attack at any time of its choosing and that if that happens they are to fight for those few minutes — long enough to bring up reinforcements.

The soldiers who stand guard and patrol at night and bark out the slogan of the American Manchu regiment — "Keep up the fire!" — are young enough to be Private Zawicki's sons.

I had felt a sense of kinship and affection for Private Zawicki long ago and feel it now for the young men who patrol still. They are American soldiers doing what they are supposed to do and doing it well — intelligent, skilled and alert.

But when I returned, I felt, as in 1961 and through all my adult life, a sense of deep distaste for the kind of Government the young soldiers of the Manchu regiment are defending. It was a nasty military regime in Private Zawicki's days and it is a nasty military regime now.

I know well what the youngsters of the Manchu regiment may not think about much — that the Government in Seoul might be important to American strategy, but it is also a Government that they would hate to live under, and would send people like me to jail.

Of course I know that although the young Americans are standing in defense of a military government, they are also standing against a tyranny far more despotic, a Communist dynasty that would not jail or censor men or women who sought the taste of freedom, but would shoot them. There is no question that the rigid, unbending dictatorship of the North is more chilling and antagonistic to any dream of liberty than the Government of the South, and so our choice between them is plain. But do we really have only that choice between the lesser of evils? I did not think so when I met Private Zawicki, and I do not think so now.

I know that in South Korea there are men and women who have struggled for years against American-supported governments, people totally opposed to the Communist dictatorship of the North, but who believe they are entitled to some of those things for which they and I believe America stands — what might be called certain inalienable rights.

The visit to Korea this winter was the first stop in an Asian journey that also took me to the Philippines and Indonesia. In each country the United States was confronted with a dilemma that has bedeviled it for almost half a century, ever since it became the first world power to insist that it stood for political democracy: how to deal with dictatorships supported by the United States, but detested by people who want to believe that we really mean what we say.

I arrived in the Philippines as the United States was being forced to pull away from a dictatorship it had staunchly supported. Change came not only because the Philippine people were simply fed up and in a revolutionary mood, but also because of a sudden reassessment by Americans in important places of exactly what constituted American interests and American security.

It was a special moment in history, but it did not solve the dilemma as much as it emphasized its importance around the world.

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I WAS NEVER TERRIBLY DISTURBED BY THE local propagandists or apparatchiks of the various dictatorships. They had their jobs. I knew that sometimes they weren't too keen on it, but they were under pressures I have never had to face.

I felt no anger for the Polish journalist who invited me out to lunch in Warsaw one day and sat me at a table against a wall. I felt sorry for him when the wall began to talk back and a terrible look of embarrassment came over his face. My recorded voice, backward, sounded like a maddened Donald Duck. I looked at my friend, he looked at me, and we both shrugged. He had been told to do what he did and he did it. I had the passport out of Poland; he didn't.

And I rather liked the Soviet radio broadcaster I met one sweltering night in a town then called Hollandia in what then was Netherlands New Guinea. A gaggle of foreign correspondents from all over the world had flown in to see the running down of the Dutch flag and the running up of the Indonesian flag.

That night we all sat on the veranda of the only hotel in town and talked a lot and drank a lot. A Russian radio man named Pavel was the loudest of the Communists and I was the loudest of the Westerners. He told us we were all capitalist slaves and I told him that he was a policeman serving the Soviet tyranny. About dawn, Pavel rose to his feet and proposed a toast:

"We are all colleagues and friends despite our differences."

I then rose with enormous, careful

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never be colleagues because I'm a newspaperman and you're a cop, Pavel."

I believe Pavel was indeed a cop — I believe most Soviet journalists I've met in far places were members of the K.G.B. or reported to the K.G.B. But Pavel profited from the Soviet system and reveled in its toughness and might and didn't pretend otherwise.

Nor was I perturbed much by third-world diplomats and civil servants at the United Nations and in Washington who had to apologize for one repulsive military dictatorship or another. The poor chaps had to go home someday, and mild contempt was the highest emotion I could muster.

But Americans and American policy — that was another matter. Our own apologists for tyranny did set my teeth on edge. The writers who visited the Soviet Union once or twice and decided the people had nice gnarled faces, so it couldn't be too bad. The playwright who remained an apologist for Stalinism until the last word, the last breath. The deliciously talented actress who denounced the American press for building up Solidarity, until the Soviet movie director at the table told her gently that the Communists in Poland really did not rule through popular acclaim but because of the Soviet Army.

Most of them are knee-jerkers of the left, but there are plenty of right legs twitching, too. Such as the conservative think-tankers who do not really like the South African Government very much but are far more concerned about the future possibility of black-imposed radicalism than the present reality of white-imposed apartheid.

So many Americans seem perpetually to be choosing "tolerable" tyrannies. They picket the Chilean Embassy, but never the Cuban. Or the other way around. Or they quite correctly see the frightening reality of the Somozistas in the contra movement in Nicaragua, which somehow obscures for them another reality — that the Sandinistas are oppressive usurpers of a united front revolution. Or the other way around.

And time after time, all these years, I have heard my own Government talk freedom but decide to support dictatorship. During my years in India in the late 1950's I saw American policy tilt toward the authoritarian military Governments of Pakistan at the price of influence and friendship within India. It was not India's vast size that mattered to me. It was that India was the only major developing country that not only chose political democracy but also stuck with it, except for a few ugly years under Indira Gandhi. There were all kinds of strategy reasons put forward about poor riven Pakistan's military importance. But I always thought it was not strategy that was so important in shaping the United States' coolness toward India, but just plain annoyance. The Indians can be terribly irritating, you know.

I was always struck by the fact that so many American diplomats seemed to get along so easily with the generals and civilian dictators. I suppose it was because they could go right in and get a yes or no instead of going through all that bother of dealing with political leaders who had to explain to their own people what they were doing. There were exceptions, of course — Ellsworth Bunker, the elegant American Ambassador to India in my time, who seemed to get along with the troublesome Indians quite well; Samuel D. Berger, the quick-minded former labor attaché who became the United States Ambassador in Seoul and soon convinced the local generals not even to think of pushing him around. (Philip C. Habib, who went on to become a Presidential trouble-shooter in the Middle East, the Philippines and Central America, was Sam Berger's deputy in those days. One day, when the generals were attempting one pressure tactic or another against the embassy, Mr. Habib shook his head in mock sorrow and said they didn't have a chance, not in an embassy "where the ambassador is a Jew, his deputy is a Lebanese and the C.I.A. station chief is a Greek.")

And while Jimmy Carter stumbled a lot and in the end didn't seem to know where he was going, his insistence on human rights as one key American policy exposed the sickening hypocrisy of the Communist dictatorships that talk about freedom movements and imprison the minds and bodies of their own subjects.

Still, after 40 years, I find myself still puzzled and pained about why my own country so often does not act as it talks and why many of my countrymen who demand freedom for themselves don't give much of a damn about it for others. I thought a lot about this as I traveled in Asia.

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